New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1946

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Bees and the Flowers"

Complete reviews appear in this issue

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK TIMES — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE — NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"The Bees and the Flowers"

PM

SEPTEMBER 29, 1946

— Kronenberger —

Not Sexy, Just Silly

PM Reviews

Beware of "comedies" in which the phone starts ringing 30 seconds after the curtain is up. Theater veterans with elephants' memories may be able to name some remarkably dazzling offerings in which this happens; but for me it has long been a portent that God is not looking after me and that I am a very long way from 11 o'clock. It was certainly a portent Thursday night when *The Bees and The Flowers*—a script that was perhaps selected by the blindfold method—was ushered into the Cort.

The Bees and The Flowers has to do with the divorced wife of a foreign correspondent, who marries again and brings her new husband home to her three school-age daughters without confiding that he is her husband. It seems that the young ladies are so mad about their father that Mama feels they will resent a stepfather and wants them to learn to like him before they find out who he is. I won't quarrel with this reasoning, or rather this plot, *per se;* but will merely remark that it leads to some of the most unnecessary complications, and some of the most tedious goings-on, that I can currently recall. A household containing three highly vocal and precocious brats is surely trying enough even when there is no mystery about mummy's matrimonial status; when each turns sleuth, sex-expert and Peeping Tillie things become a good deal more menacing; and when the eldest daughter keeps company with a 17-year-old amateur psychoanalyst, a mild foam begins to protrude from one's lips.

In fewer words, *The Bees and the Flowers* is an exceedingly silly comedy seldom ventilated by its dialogue or its acting. Barbara Robbins and Russell Hardie play the grown-ups with all the unreality urged on them by the plot; and of the three daughters, only Sybil Stocking as the youngest has any charm or appeal.

—Louis Kronenberger

'THE BEES AND THE FLOWERS.'

Play by Frederick Kohner and Albert Mannheimer; setting and lighting by Edward Gilbert; costumes by Enid Gilbert; staged by Mannheimer; presented by Mort H. Singer Jr., at the Cort Theater Thursday evening, September 26, 1946. The cast:

Louise Morgan	Barbara Robbins
Nancy	Joan Frey
Alix Morgan	Sybil Stocking
Tess Morgan	Rosemary Rice
Ilka Morgan	Joyce Van Patten
Winston Atchison	Michael Dreyfuss
Tack Cooper	Russell Hardie
Dippy Marshall	Sylvia Lane
Drayman	Maurice Brenner
Tom	Leonard Bell
Jerry	Peggy Romano

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

SEPTEMBER 27, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Brats and Wisecracks

ANTIC catch lines explode like tiny fire-crackers in "The Bees and the Flowers". At times they crackle amusingly in the new domestic comedy at the Cort. Too frequently they merely fizzle. On the whole they are more diverting than the doings which they accompany. For Frederick Kohner and Albert Mannheimer, the authors of the piece, have evolved the somewhat farcical situation of having a step-father of three brats pretend that he is a mere friend of their mother while they grow accustomed to him. They have not known quite what to do with it. The plot is resolved by the simple expedient of lowering the final curtain. Some time before then the play has run its random course.

* * *

The theme of the work, if it can be said to have one, is expressed in the unfortunate fellow's complaint that his wife is at the wrong end of the silver cord. The machinations of the youngsters to get him out of the home find the eldest daughter simulating a violent passion for him. The second teen-ager wavers between a possessive domination of her old lady and a chance to steal her sister's beau. The youngest, and only recognizable member of the trio, sums up "The Bees and the Flowers" rather succinctly when she brings a scene to a close by fervently remarking: "nuts!"

* * *

The material of this late summer theatrical blossoming would be rather trying in any hands. It is not helped by several of the performances at the Cort. The no-longer-so-little Joyce Van Patten demonstrates that pre-adolescents need no lessons in overacting from their elders. It may have been her intention to caricature her role but she has really hammed it up to the hilt. Rosemary Rice is more restrained, but equally unattractive as the prom-trotting sister. Russell Hardie and Barbara Robbins, as their bedevilled step-father, and mother, take the going as best they can, which means gingerly.

* * *

Fortunately the wee Sybil Stocking moves serenely through the production as the tot who first takes a fancy to her new daddy. Her discovery of the magic in the word sex is delightful and so is her chit-chat with her best friend Dippy, played with pert timing by Sylvia Lane. Michael Dreyfuss is mildly amusing as a serious young student of psycho-analysis, who butts into the small family commotion. "The Bees and the Flowers" is the sort of stage exhibit which makes every ripple of excitement appear to be a white-cap. It is inoffensive and generally inane.

New York World-Telegram

SEPTEMBER 27, 1946

'Bees and Flowers' a Bubbly Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Bees and the Flowers" is soap opera trying to be a bubble bath.

This mixup of teen and under teen-agers, objecting to their mother's acceptance of a new father for them, has an etherized acquaintance with infinity. It could go on forever, or it could be disposed of in a fast 15 minutes.

Just why Louise Morgan decided not to tell her three daughters that she had married again is never made very clear. They would have had just as much fun introducing a new MAN into their circle as they do trying to keep him out.

Attached to Father.

But the youthful feminine trio remain romantically attached to their radio commentator father, who has deserted them and their mother. When Louise, otherwise mother, returns from a vacation in Mexico with a beau all wedded, it is beyond her ken that the children should know enough about life to accept her revision.

She is wrong.

Daughter Tess decides that winning the newcomer, obvious wolf that he must be, from mother, is the answer. In the process she loses her own beau to her sister, Ilka.

The tenderfoot father, Heaven help him, enlists the aid of the youngest of his step-daughters, Alix. She willingly arranges an argument between the two older girls.

Becomes Involved.

One by one, the children learn that the handsome Tack Cooper is the new head of the house. In the course of settling his and their own affairs, they involve the entire family in an immaculate addition to the tree, one which turns out to be most legitimate.

"The Bees and the Flowers" is the kind of presentation that would equally benefit by 85 more or 85 less complications to its plot. It races along as if any minute a commercial might kill a climax.

Russell Hardie fares better than the rest by underplaying the unwelcome father. Against a barrage of feminine wiles he reads quiet lines that startle the cacophonous kindergarten.

Miss Robbins Tries Valiantly.

Barbara Robbins tries valiantly to make a human being out of a mother who is written without the least understanding of her offspring.

Sybil Stocking makes the youngest of the bobby sox trio sympathetic and engaging, which is what the play asks. Joyce Van Patten is already too knowing an actress not to take advantage of her good moments in contrast to the stooging most of the script supplies her.

Rosemary Rice enacts a believable little girl in her superficial efforts to pit another generation's wolf against her own. And Michael Dreyfuss is as sophomoric as his lines claim, in the role of her intended.

The contrived sustenance of the play is as subtle as a bicycle pump. Most of its humor has the refinement it would require to watch a 12-year-old on a Minsky runway.

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 27, 1946

Kiddies Parade

By BROOKS ATKINSON

By listening carefully you could hear many innocent people screaming with laughter at the Cort last evening. This would be strictly on their own responsibility. For "The Bees and the Flowers," by Frederick Kohner and Albert Mannheimer, is a bizarre phenomenon in the free and democratic theatre better than "Hidden Horizon" but more objectionable. Brooding on human frailties as Broadway repeatedly mirrors them, one can only wonder who thought this comedy was worth the ordeal and expense of public exposure; and one can only attribute the shrieks of laughter to the nervousness that often overtakes people when they find themselves lost in a theatre, with no way to get out except through the exits.

Mr. Kohner and Mr. Mannheimer have manufactured a play for themselves by withholding from the characters one obvious bit of normal information. Mrs. Louise Cooper, divorced wife of a thrilling foreign correspondent, does not tell her three children that she has married Tack Cooper, although she brings him to live in their house. Since he is not a foreign correspondent, naturally the children do not want him around. When the simple truth is conveyed to them in the last act, the comedy ceases to exist—and high time, too. For you, who are obviously an honest citizen, cannot imagine the convolutions of nonsense that rollick around the stage while the play is winding itself up or running down.

As his own director, Mr. Mannheimer has saddled himself with a scrambled performance below the standard of a working summer theatre. None of the actors seems to know what to do with himself. In the circumstances the actors frequently give the audience the teeth as the handiest substitute for acting. Russell Hardie's acting is hardly more than a series of juvenile steps forward and manly stances; and Barbara Robbins, having nothing constructive to do, pays more attention to the audience than to the other characters in the play. Under happier conditions Rosemary Rice might act intelligibly; and Sybil Stocking and Joyce Van Patten might also act if some one would mercifully give them some help.

But there is no help in "The Bees and the Flowers" for anyone, for it represents no talent for the stage.

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The Sun

SEPTEMBER 27, 1946

'The Bees and the Flowers' Trifling Comedy by Two Authors From Hollywood.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

A ragged and rattled little comedy called "The Bees and the Flowers," all about marriage and adolescents, took up temporary quarters last evening at the Cort and went through the motions of being a play. Two Hollywood writers, Frederick Kohner and Albert Mannheimer, acknowledge the authorship and Mort H. Singer Jr. takes the billing as the producer.

There is quite a lot that is vexatious, and very little that is entertaining, in the Kohner-Mannheimer fable of the attractive mother of three daughters who goes into a second marriage in Mexico and whose new husband, once they've returned to New York, moves into her apartment without the children being aware of his status.

In the second act, after the dear little girls have learned the truth, the authors run out of play so completely that they bring in the she's-going-to-have-a-baby device to patch up a silly quarrel, a device that grows less and less funny as the drama advances in years.

The direction, dialogue and situations provided in "The Bees and the Flowers" make such young actresses as Joyce Van Patten and Rosemary Rice seem a little too overpowering. Sybil Stocking, playing the youngest of the precocious Morgan brats, is the most natural of the lot and despite the shortcomings of the script she has moments of genuine charm.

Barbara Robbins, an ordinarily skillful performer, and Russell Hardie, who has been in a play or two in his day, don't do much with the sketchy roles of the mother and the man she brought home with her. Michael Dreyfuss holds up rather bravely as a youth who goes in for psychology.

The Cort's new comedy is trifling. The picture industry, it seems, has already bought "The Bees and the Flowers." It might make some sort of movie. It isn't a play.

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New York Post

SEPTEMBER 27, 1946

Wee Ones Discuss S-E-X In 'The Bees and the Flowers'

By Vernon Rice

From the title of last night's comedy, "The Bees and the Flowers," one would gather that the play might have something to do with S-E-X. But any similarity between that subject, either living or dead, and the Frederick Kohner-Albert Mannheimer play, which will make but a brief appearance at the Cort, is just a matter of childish discussions. It's taken up and gone into quite thoroughly by a pair of eight-year-old girls, and then again by another couple of females, age 14 and 16 respectively. I can't recall when I've heard a subject so authoritatively discussed by those who knew so little about what they were discussing.

To some people, however, there's nothing quite so funny as adult words put into childish mouths, especially when it comes to S-E-X. To some playwrights it's a wow of a comedy wherein children behave not as children naturally behave, but as childish puppets in adults' hands. From all appearances the Messrs. Kohner and Mannheimer are such playwrights.

"The Bees and the Flowers" might have been a passable play, though a slight one, if the kids had been left alone to act as natural and normal children generally do; if what the little ones talked about so endlessly had any direct bearing on what transpired upon the stage, and if the premise had been made more acceptable and plausible.

Mama Can't Talk.

It's the premise, that a very attractive divorced woman couldn't tell her three children that while on a holiday in Mexico she had met and married a very attractive man, that kills the show. No reasonable obstacle, or any obstacle at all, for that matter, was ever put in her way. There was talk about a fondness for a wandering father, but that's all it ever was—talk.

Of course, she could have told them in the first of the six scenes, and then there would have been no play at all. Come to think of it that might not have been such a bad idea.

Russell Hardie, as the man brought home by Mother, and Barbara Robbins, as Mother, do what they can with the two principal adult roles in the show. But inasmuch as both had parts which were sketchily written, they could do little but rely on their own personalities.

It's a good thing that their personalities are pleasing.

Joyce Van Patten, Rosemary Rice and Sybil Stocking had the daughters' roles, and it was little Miss Stocking, making her Broadway debut, who walked off with the acting blue ribbon in the juvenile department. She's what is known as a natural. She could have easily been a precocious brat, for to her fell most of the discussion of you-know-what, but her own natural charm and easy manner kept her out of that pit fall.

Able youthful support was given by Michael Dreyfuss, Sylvia Lane, Peggy Romano and Leonard Bell.

Albert Mannheimer, the director, offered no help to Albert Mannheimer, the playwright. Mr. Mannheimer, the director, seemed to have been confused by what Mr. Mannheimer, the playwright, had written, and was undecided whether the piece should be played for a comedy, or for a serious work, or if it should be played at all.

It's been reported that "The Bees and the Flowers" was sold to the movies for $50,000 as a starring vehicle for Jeanette MacDonald.

It just goes to show you what the films are buying these days.